

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

FONSI No. _____

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INTRODUCTION

In accordance with Section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, the Department of Interior has determined that an environmental impact statement is not required for the implementation of the Central Valley Project Improvement Act Land Retirement Demonstration Project proposed acquisition of 7,000 acres in western Fresno County within the Westlands Water District and 8,000 acres in eastern Kings County and western Tulare Counties, within the Atwell Island Water District and Alpaugh Irrigation District. The FONSI was developed by the United States Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), the Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in conformance with Sections 3408(h) of Public Law 102-575, Title XXXIV, the Central Valley Project Improvement Act (CVPIA) and Section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended. This Finding of No Significant Impact is supported by and incorporates by reference, Interior's 1999 CVPIA *Land Retirement Demonstration Project Environmental Assessment*.

Land Retirement is a voluntary program whereby Interior may purchase land, water and other property interests from willing sellers who receive CVP water allocations. There will be no condemnation of land by federal authorities as part of this program. Retiring land eliminates the application of irrigation water thereby reducing the amount of subsurface drainage water produced from a particular piece of property.

The goals of the Land Retirement Demonstration Project are to: reduce the volume of subsurface drainage water, rehabilitate retired lands to upland habitat for wildlife, and acquire water for other CVPIA purposes as outlined in section 3402 of CVPIA.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action is to retire various parcels from irrigated agriculture in two geographic areas with differing geologic and hydrologic characteristics and instituting a 5-year demonstration project consisting of statistical and empirical studies designed to determine the physical effects of retirement upon groundwater levels and quality, soil chemistry and impacts to biota. A number of habitat rehabilitation techniques such as direct seeding, transplanting, restoring topographic features to laser-leveled fields (micro-topography), and land imprinting will be tested to determine which methods work best under various site conditions. Four land treatments will be studied: revegetation, reestablishment of microtopography, revegetation and microtopography, and control or no treatment. The project will monitor groundwater quality and shallow water table levels, soil chemistry and the potential risk of wildlife exposure to contaminants such as selenium, in the project area.

At the end of the 5-year demonstration project, Interior will continue to manage these lands for upland habitat and demonstration purposes of educating landowners and other land managers in upland habitat rehabilitation techniques. The information gained from this project will be used to guide future implementation of the CVPIA Land Retirement Program.

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ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED ACTION

The EA considered three alternatives in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act: No-Action, retiring land with its associated CVP water allocation, and retiring land without its associated CVP water allocation.

MANAGEMENT ACTION SELECTED

After careful analysis of the alternatives and based on the summary of effects as discussed in the EA, Interior has determined that the most appropriate action is to retire land and acquire the associated water allocation on a case-by-case basis. Interior will acquire water whenever possible, to be used primarily for environmental purposes. Efforts will be made to work with the Westlands Water District in partnership with their land retirement program to maximize benefits for drainage source reduction and rehabilitation of upland habitat.

By implementing this decision, Interior hopes to "achieve a reasonable balance among competing demands for use of CVP water, including the requirements of fish and wildlife, agricultural, municipal and industrial and power contractors" (CVPIA sect. 3402(f)). Allowing water to stay with the water district with limits on where and how it can be used meets the purposes of CVPIA as defined in section 3402 and is also authorized under section 3408(h)(1)... "the secretary is authorized to purchase from willing sellers land and associated water rights and other property interests....and to target such purchases to areas deemed most beneficial to the overall purchase program, including the purposes of this title", which refers back to section 3402.

FINDING

In accordance with NEPA, as amended, Interior has determined that this 5-year demonstration project is not a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

This determination is supported by the following factors:

1. There would be no significant impact to surface water resources even though surface water quality will improve within the project area due to closure of an existing evaporation pond, and an overall reduction in subsurface drainage volumes. These benefits are confined to the project area and will not be significant on a regional level.
2. The shallow water table will decline within the project area, and groundwater quality will improve but because these benefits are confined to a relatively small area these benefits are not significant.
3. The demonstration project lands proposed for acquisition have the potential to be successfully rehabilitated to native upland habitat and may provide important linkages for the movement of animals. However, within the 5-year project life, no significant habitat suitable for threatened and endangered species will be developed as it has been documented that this recovery process usually takes 10-15 years.
4. No adverse impacts to biological resources will occur as the project is designed with safeguards and contingency plans to limit exposure of wildlife to any potential contaminants. There will be beneficial impacts to biota with the establishment of new upland habitat, however it is not expected that any habitat suitable for threatened and endangered species will be established within the project's 5-year life as stated above, therefore no significant impacts to biological resources will occur as a result of this action.

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5. Jobs and tax revenues will be reduced within the project area. However, these losses will be offset due to federal payments-in-lieu of taxes, and the potential for creation of new jobs resulting from habitat rehabilitation activities, and redirection of water to non-drainage impaired areas with higher value crops such as orchards and vineyards, therefore no significant impacts will occur.
6. Land use within the project area will change from irrigated agriculture to non-irrigated agricultural uses such as grazing, dryland farming and upland wildlife habitat which are compatible with irrigated agriculture.. This change is on a voluntary basis and landowners will be compensated for the purchase of their property. Weed and pest control measures have been designed into the project to prevent adverse impacts to neighbors, therefore no significant impacts will occur from land use changes.
7. No Indian Trust Assets occur within the project area, so none would be affected.
8. Air Quality will improve due to less soil disturbance and the reestablishment of upland habitat in the project area. However, since the project area is limited to a very small percentage of the region's agricultural lands, these improvements will not significantly affect the regional air quality.

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RECOMMENDED:

Environmental Officer Bureau of Reclamation, Mid-Pacific Region	Date
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Environmental Coordinator U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Region	Date
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Environmental Coordinator Bureau of Land Management, California State Office	Date
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APPROVED:

Regional Director Bureau of Reclamation, Mid-Pacific Region	Date
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Director California-Nevada Operations Office	Date
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Acting State Director Bureau of Land Management, California State Office	Date
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PROGRAM CONTACT:

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